

Every now and then we end up reading the following quote –

janmanaa jaayatE SUDraḥ | samskaaraad hi bhavEt dvijaḥ ||  
vEda-paaThaad bhavEt vipra | brahma janaati iti braahmaNah ||

or as a slight variation -

janmanaa jaayate shUDraḥ | samskaaraat dvija uchyate ||  
vEdavit tu viprah | brahmavid braahmanah ||

or something similar, as an explanation for varNa/jaati/caste(?) system.

However, i for one have my doubts about its correctness & authenticity!

Can the learned-seniors (jnaanavRdhaah) enlighten us on the origin(s) of this quote, and also explain the authenticity thereof !?

In My Humble Opinion -

The four terms that are referred to therein are - śūdraḥ dvijaḥ vipra brahmanah ! The varNa system as referred in the RgvEda (puruSa-sUktah) must necessarily have - brahmanah kShatriya vaiShya śūdraḥ ! Therefore the above quotation is incomplete at best and may even be a corrupted version at worst !

Also, the sequence of the three terms therein - dvijaḥ vipra brahmanah - seems to refer to the progressive stages in one's aadhyaatma saadhana, whereas the presence of the first term - śūdraḥ - undermines the very intent of the possible theme of that quotation ! Just try to substitute the word "śūdraḥ" there in by the word "jantuh" and then suddenly you (any sincere seeker of truth) will realize that the whole thing makes a lot of sense; and also it then indeed refers to the stages in the spiritual development (aadhyaatma saadhana) of any individual - irrespective of any jaati or kula or varNa or caste or whatever!

So, i would humbly say that there is a possible mutation/corruption therein, in the sense that a word got replaced (for whatever intent - clever or foolish); and the very theme of that quotation got twisted as if it can now be referred to as an explanation for the varNa system!

By the way, varNa system has its origins in RgvEda (puruSa-sUktah) itself and there may be later references as well, but in any case it may not need any cleverly twisted quotations from any other quarters! The term "caste" is imposed by the external rulers (British?) in as much as their society also has been 'cast' into 'class' distinctions derived from birth/progeny/pedigree/etc. The varNa system of the vEdic period is quite scientific/rational/systematic in determining the varNa based on the individual's predominant characteristics and/or attitudes and/or aptitudes etc. and not based on their profession - a possible profession is recommended based on the varNa!

Here is a more elaborate explanation from my side - still open in seeking the opinion of the learned-seniors (jnaanavRdhaah):

The SIOka draws our attention to the four terms, namely - (1) "SUDraḥ" (2) "dvijaḥ" (3) "vipra" (4) "braahmaNah". Let us ask the question as to what does each of the four terms [and specifically the fourth term "braahmaNah"] refers to, by understanding the overall semantics of the entire SIOka as a whole. Let us try to answer this question in two [mutually complementary] ways - (a) through a logical assertion in the positive sense, and also (b) through a logical rejection in the negative sense.

(a) One can observe that of the above four terms, the latter three terms can refer to the progressive stages of the spiritual/aadhyaatmic development of an individual saadhaka, as can be easily confirmed from the very semantics of the SIOka. So the fourth term "braahmaNah" must necessarily be indicative of the siddhi or the goal of the saadhana, and therefore cannot be referring to any varNa [or jaati or kula etc]. That is an logical assertion in the positive sense.

Now, in order to try out other alternative possibilities for the overall semantics of the entire SIOka, the individual terms must necessarily be amenable for multiple interpretations/meanings. Notice that while the first and the fourth terms can be considered to be referring to varNa, the second and third terms ["dvijaḥ" and "vipra"] do not lend themselves any such interpretation. Hence, the overall semantics of the Sloka as a whole can be fixed as asserted in the positive sense above; and has nothing to do with any varNa [or jaati or kula etc] at all. Thus we establish the correspondence, or conformity, between the semantics of the latter three [out of the four] terms and the overall semantics of the entire SIOka as a whole.

(b) Also a possible argument that two [first & fourth] out of the four terms can indeed be referring to varNa does not fit into the overall semantics of the SIOka as a whole, because, then the middle two terms will be out of place, and that renders the entire SIOka to be just a confounded statement. So, the four terms must necessarily be not referring to varNa. Specifically, the term "braahmaNah" cannot be referring to varNa. This is a logical rejection in the negative sense.

Now we need to analyze and understand the (ir)relevance of just one of the four terms - the first term "SUDraḥ", which is certainly a term referring to varNa, and has no known association with any possible initial stage of spiritual/aadhyaatmic development. That is simple enough! And that is why i have serious doubts as to the correctness & authenticity of that SIOka. My hunch is that the first term must have been "jantuh" rather than "SUDraḥ"; and then the whole SIOka makes perfect sense. Any just-born jeeva is indeed a jantuh. Humans have been endowed with the potential for further spiritual or aadhyaatmic development/evolution [in addition to just physical growth] and that is what is indicated by the overall semantics of the SIOka.

I propose that the above Sloka/verse be read as -

janmanaa jaayatE jantuh | samskaaraat hi bhavEt dvijaḥ ||  
vEda-paaThaat bhavEt vipra | brahma jnaanaat hi braahmaNah ||